In 1000 CE, Northeast Florida was a wilderness of spiritual beauty and natural dangers

Written by Craig Morris, Park Ranger

A life-long fantasy begins again each time I launch a canoe or kayak into the St. Johns River estuary. As I silently glide through the endless maze of creeks, an overwhelming desire to return to the past arises within me. I imagine that somehow my next paddle stroke will propel me back in time to a wild and undeveloped land of a thousand years ago. The saltmarshes of the St. Johns River are the only remaining places in Northeast Florida that retain the look and feel of Florida1000CE. Everything else has changed.

As I explore this aquatic wilderness my imagination is driven by the smell of the sea air, the sounds of crying ospreys, and the perpetual motion of the tide. These same sensations were here 1,000 years ago and my desire is to join with them and escape a present day Florida that feels anything but natural. The saltmarsh is radiant, making it difficult to keep from wondering how bountiful and majestic the rest of north Florida must have been! How abundant were animals and fish? What were the people like? How large were their cities? Where were they located? Did the people of that time enjoy living here as hundreds of thousands of people do today? With insights learned from science we can return to the Florida of 1000CE. Come, launch your kayak. Take a ride upon the St. Johns River with me and return to the Florida of the last millennium.

Our journey begins as the sun rises just beyond the mouth of the St. Johns River. The waterway's entrance, with no rock jetties redirecting its shape, angles in from the northeast, and great sandy shoals dominate the southern approach. Riding an incoming tide, with the sun to our backs, a swift inland-flowing current propels us towards a familiar, yet strikingly different, looking Northeast Florida. As we steer our way through the breakers and into the river the water appears to boil with huge schools of fish, some of which leap over our kayaks, while others bump into us with such force that we fear capsizing. Gulls, osprey, and hundreds of other sea-birds circle and scream. Schools of dolphin appear,then disappear. The impact of the natural bounty is overwhelming and it takes great effort to focus on paddling our craft safely into the river.

Inside the river's mouth, the water turns placid and we are free to turn our attention to the land. Spectacular vistas containing familiar trees, plants, and animals, stun us with their natural beauty and magnitude. Herds of manatee graze in the estuarine shallows. Bald eagles perch in towering pine trees along the river's banks. Large flocks of waterfowl darken the sky and mosquitoes are not as numerous as today. The familiar tea-colored water seems clearer and has a fresh, pungent, clean smell. Perhaps no other place on earth is better suited to sustaining life than this bountiful estuary and its attendant upland areas.

Following the river inland, we notice signs of human activity. Saltmarsh creek entrances are blocked by a mesh of tree branches bound with vines that trap fish. Fish and crustaceans swim into the saltmarsh at high tide, then a gate or net is pulled across its entrance. These weirs trap the fish and crabs at low tide, where they are easily picked up or speared. These ingenious labyrinths took much time to build and maintain; reflecting their great importance as the

principle means by which the American Indians catch fish. Hardly any stretch of the river is free from their presence.

As the upland areas become more numerous, we begin to see human settlements: camps, villages, and a large ceremonial city that seems to serve as the hub and capitol of this region. Within the area we now call Duval County there are at least 20 villages, home to between 100 to 300 people each. The villages are all built along the river's edge and the average distance between them, by water, is two miles. Each village is governed by a chief subordinate who is in power to the regional chief ruling as Supreme Lord of the immediate geographical area.

Hunting and gathering of food dominates daily activities and village life. The people of this civilization stay outdoors most of the time, retiring to their dwellings only at night or in stormy weather. They have no written language. Agriculture and domesticated animals are practically nonexistent, as is the concept of personal property save specialized tools, clothes and ornaments. They are fond of going to the beach with their children and setting up picnics.

As we paddle along, we notice many alligators sunning themselves along the riverbanks. (Guess I failed to mention that these waters are teeming with alligators) Yes, our kayaks do seem small when compared to the size of some of these beasts. In Northeast Florida 1000CE, there are over one million of these creatures, some over 20 feet long. Alligators trouble the American Indians; they have to keep a watch against them at night and sometimes even in the day. Alligators are such a threat that guards must also be posted when groups go swimming. It appears that these people fear death from animals more so than they do from other humans. Disease and illnesses are almost non existent.

Most of the people are distantly related to each other and trace kinship and personal identity through their mother's side of the family. A chief attains his title not because his father was the last chief, but because his mother was the oldest sister of the former chief. A young boy is raised and taught by the brothers, uncles and male cousins of his mother. Villages usually contain two or more clans of female-linked relatives. Marriage within one's clan is forbidden. When a couple is wed, the man leaves home and goes to his wife's village, usually living in the house of her mother. Both men and women wear tattoos that signify the clan they belong to as well as their roles in society. People of high political status wear the most tattoos.

The role of men in this society is that of provider and protector. Men are the warriors protecting their homes from hostile invaders who would steal food and young women. Men hunt, fish, and make tools. They teach the adolescent boys of their clan, guiding them through their formative years until they are capable of shouldering adult responsibilities. Certain men of high- ranking clans might also become religious leaders and healers.

Men wear loincloths, grow long hair and truss it atop their heads in a bun. They do not eat what they kill or catch, consuming only foods that another has given them. They keep only the bones of the animals they kill placing them in the walls of their dwellings to assure future success in hunting. In their leisure time, men lounge around in the shade and play with young children.

In this society women are the perpetuators of culture and managers of daily life. It is the women who do most of the food preparation and storage. They also gather nuts, dig roots, collect shellfish and perform other less physical chores. Women wear their hair long and strait down their backs. If a woman's husband dies, she will cut her hair as a sign of mourning and will not remarry until it grows out in full. Their clothing consists of lavish garments made from woven Spanish moss. Women own their own dwellings and may divorce their husband simply by throwing his clothes and belongings out the door.

During their menstrual cycles, women live alone and will not eat meat. This same practice occurs after childbirth. Women serve as midwives and men are not allowed to witness childbirth. Women are considered biologically more powerful than men. It is women who are in closer contact with the seasons and natural cycles of life. Therefore, they are viewed as being more sacred, mysterious, and valuable to society than are men.

To us, the sexuality of this culture seems quite progressive. While a man is permitted to have only one wife at a time, he is expected to have sexual relations with her grandmother, mother, and sisters when they so demand. Likewise a woman is expected to be intimate not only with her husband but all of his immediate male relatives. Promiscuity before marriage is frowned upon, as is intercourse with others not related to one's spouse. Homosexuality is not uncommon, but is frowned upon by most members of society.

These people live in a world that they believe is populated not only by humans, animals, and plants, but by gods, demons, and spirits. Theirs is a three-tiered universe. The Celestial Sky is the home of the gods and the spirits of deceased chiefs and nobles. The Earth is the residence of the living, a place where demons and gods confront people each day attempting to influence their actions. The Underground world is the abode of demons and the departed spirits of common people. Theirs is a world that recognizes the need for the continuum of natural order. Life becomes stressful and out of control when people are out of synch with their surroundings---in this case, the seasons, moons, and tides. The remedy to this imbalance is to light a new fire.

When times of trouble arise, these people seek seclusion, meditate on their problems, and personally resolve to continue forward in a positive manner. They then light a small new fire as a sign of their personal commitment: to learn from the past and attempt to make a better future. Lighting a new fire is also performed as a solemn group ceremony to begin their New Year that occurs at Winter Solstice.

In their religion every animal can potentially be a messenger from one of the two cosmic realms. Remember that these people are astute observers of nature. Any animal that is observed doing something deviant from its normal, natural pattern potentially brings either good or evil. For example, if a person hears the cry of a startled owl or surprises one into flight while walking in the woods, it is taken as an omen of approaching evil. If one hears the natural call of an owl or observes one without frightening it, then the spirits are showing pity upon the living. A chance encounter with a snake is always a sign of impending trouble.

We have ventured west upon the river some six miles, passing villages and hunting camps whose shorelines are lined with beached canoes. At this point the river takes a southwest bend creating

an immense and grand cove over one mile in width and almost three miles long. Here lies the best the land has to offer. Sheltered from the ocean and storms, it is a place of tranquil tidal beauty, of bountiful shallow waters that offers its human inhabitants the benefits of both sea and land. Entering this sanctuary, we can see in the distance the Great City.

No other settlement we have encountered on our trip comes close to the size and beauty of the Great City. It is over a mile long, situated upon a high bluff located in the center of the cove, and bordered by clear streams. On the inside of each stream are areas where members of high-ranking clans reside in elaborate ornate dwellings. Storage buildings are numerous and the Regional Chief strictly regulates access to them. A select artisan class of specialized craftsmen works copper and other exotic materials obtained through an elaborate trade network that extends as far north as the Great Lakes. Other artisans include wood carvers, potters, shell workers, and painters.

Located in the center of the Great City, on the highest ground, is the cemetery. An earthen ramp more than 200 yards long, runs parallel to the shoreline and leads to the buildings that compose this (their) most revered place. The most prominent building is oval shaped, built of whole tree trunks, and appears to function as a council house. It is large enough to seat hundreds of people. Adjacent to the council house there are several smaller structures occupied by the priestly elite.

One of these smaller huts is used as a storage area for a certain red mineral, known as ochre, with which they anoint the bones of their dead. On the highest point within the cemetery complex is a putrid smelling building used as a mortuary. It is a square structure containing wooden beams onto which the deceased are laid. When common people die they are carried here and their flesh is allowed to rot from their bones. After this process the bones are then washed, anointed with ochre, and stored in bundles to await interment.

When a chief dies, his body and drinking cup are taken into the cemetery complex for burial preparation and the whole city begins three days of mourning and fasting. The priests and their helpers consecrate the burial area, located to the side of the mortuary building, by spreading ochre on the ground. When finished, the grave resembles a huge sand painting. Into the grave his adorned corpse is laid along with his cup and a few personal belongings. The bundled bones of commoners are then arrayed around the grave of the chief. These are all covered with sand carried in baskets by elite members of the society.
The chief's dwelling and all the rest of his personal belongings are then burned in a ritualistic bonfire. For the next six months, women, specially chosen for the task, lament the death of their chief at dawn, midday, and dusk with great screams and howls. Priests and nobles are also treated in such fashion after they die.

These people and their culture are inseparably connected with the estuary and coastal uplands. Their religion and ceremonies reflect a lifestyle tied not to agriculture but to hunting and gathering. They have somehow learned to use only as much of the natural resources as they need in order to survive. They do not over exploit these resources and treat them with great care and reverence.

The Northeast Florida of 1,000 years ago was anything but pristine and simple. The environment was not Eden-like, nor untouched by humans. If you wanted to return to that Florida you would need to continue back in time to about 12,000 BC before humans occupied the Florida peninsula.

Northeast Florida 1000CE was a place where humans had lived and altered the land for thousands of years. It was pristine by our standards, yet it is doubtful people then would have considered it as such.

Now the tide is falling and we must follow it back into our own time. Through knowledge gleaned from history, archaeology, and biology coupled with our imaginations it is possible for us to turn the back clock 1,000 years. A quiet kayak trip through the saltmarshes of the Timucuan Preserve and Talbot Islands State Park can inspire visions of an older, less developed Northeast Florida and may help reconnect us with the natural rhythms of life.

Being in balance with one's surroundings is a noble goal. It's worth taking time to reflect on the Florida of 1000 years ago. Will the people alive one thousand years from now dream about the Florida of today? Will they be impressed with our treatment of the natural resources as we are of the inhabitants of years' past? Will we have left them healthy saltmarshes so that they too will have the opportunity to paddle back into time? Let's hope so, only 1,000 years will tell.

Craig Morris is a National Park Service Ranger at the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, located in Jacksonville, Florida. The 46,000 acre Timucuan Preserve is nestled between the St. Johns and Nassau Rivers and provides visitors opportunities to experience the struggles of early inhabitants of northeast Florida as well as various recreational activities such as kayaking. The Timucuan Preserve's visitor center, located at Ft. Caroline National Memorial in East Arlington, features exhibits highlighting the culture of the early Native Americans. Kayak launching facilities are available at the Timucuan Preserve's Cedar Point Area, located off Cedar Point Road on the Northside and at Talbot Islands State Park (251-2320). The Timucuan Preserve is open 7 days/week, 9 a.m.- 5 p.m., admission is free. For more information, contact Park Rangers at 641-7155.